

The Search for Tzanáta is the sequel to award-winning spiritual adventure Curse of the Tahíera.

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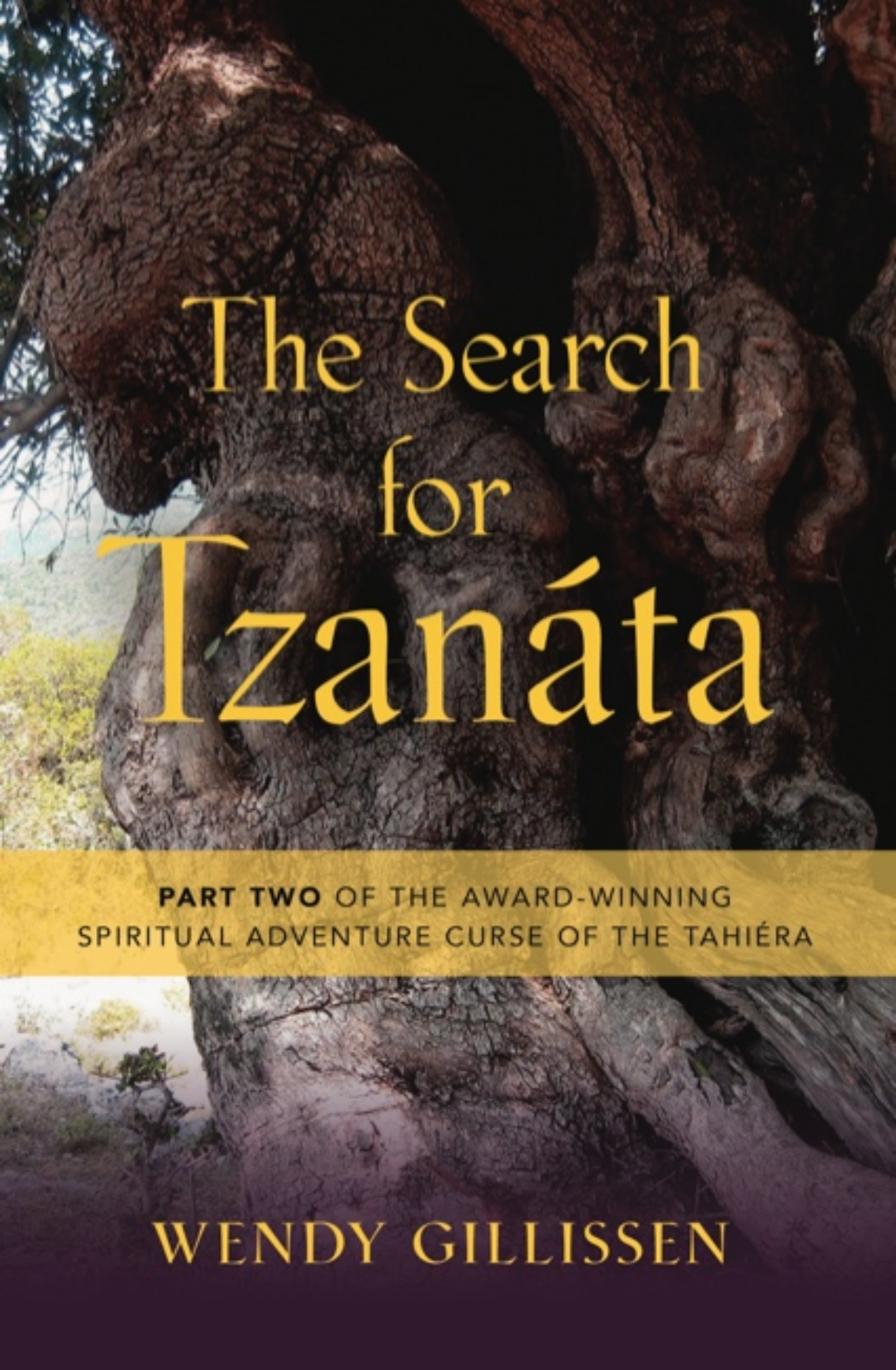
PART TWO OF THE AWARD-WINNING SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE CURSE OF THE TAHÍERA

by Wendy Gillissen

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The Search
for
Tzanáta

**PART TWO OF THE AWARD-WINNING
SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE CURSE OF THE TAHIÉRA**

WENDY GILLISSEN

The Search for Tzanáta

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2

Áyra



He was walking down a steep hill, the sun in his eyes and the wind at his back, blowing strands of dark hair in his face. Strewn about in the grassy fields before him like mushrooms were little round dwellings formed of reed and clay. A tall woman stood in the long grass, wiping copper curls out of her face. Maetis. Her lips curved into a welcoming smile.

As he got closer, he saw the children running through the grass, laughing and singing. Their hair shone like gold and bronze in the sun. A little boy grasped Maetis' hand and turned his head to look at him. Rom felt a string unroll from his heart and go out to the boy; inevitable, it sprang from his heart and rolled away into the field. Halfway through, it suddenly split, each length of string going into a different direction. One rolled towards Maetis and his son. The other—

He felt their eyes upon him. They stood staring, like ghosts, their tattered clothing moving in the wind. Bleak and hollow, their dark eyes seemed to plead with him. Their faces were drawn and pale. The thread rolled towards them and a small shadow detached itself from the group. It stepped forward. Rom's eyes widened as he looked into the face of another little boy.

Dark as the other was bright, still as the other was vibrant, there was something about the way he stood there, about the angle of the dark head, that was familiar. The eyes were fixed on his face. Not hollow, not like the eyes of the others, but proud and alive. They glittered like darkest gems. The boy opened his mouth as if to speak. Breathless, Rom waited.

‘*Dáydach?*’ He opened his eyes and looked straight into Dánayel’s face. The boy had clambered on top of him as if he were a small hill and peered into his face. ‘Wake up! Breakfast is ready and so is uncle Eldairc. He said to come get you. He says you’re going on a journey.’

The kitchen was flooded with the light of the morning sun. It fell through the double windows and lit up the silver in Yldich’s ginger hair.

‘Good morning to you,’ he said, and pulled up a chair. ‘Yárah is preparing your breakfast. And then we must talk about our journey.’

Rom took a sip of herb tea and began buttering a bread roll. He wasn’t really surprised. If there was trouble brewing in the South, Yldich would want to stick his nose into it. ‘So... where are we going, exactly?’

‘To the south coast. I would like to sniff around a bit, see if I can get an impression of what’s going on there. With the ‘Wandering Folk.’ Yldich took a bite of his bread roll. ‘Also, I’d like to get some information about how we should go about obtaining a boat.’

Rom lowered his bread. ‘A—a boat? What for?’

‘Well. As we don’t know anything about the threat that’s coming our way, we are at a severe disadvantage. I thought we could turn the tide by making the first move and paying the... Lost Shore a visit before they come to find *us*.’

Rom’s mouth fell open. ‘But... do you know anything about boats?’

Yldich grinned. ‘Not in the slightest.’ He leaned back in his chair, munching away at his bread with an expression of serene self-contentment. ‘I thought we’d solve that riddle when we come to it.’

Rom sat shaking his head. ‘And how do you suppose we’re going to find this Lost Shore?’

Yldich sat up. ‘Ah. That’s where you come in. You see, there are no surviving maps as far as we know. No clues that could tell us where the *Tzanatzi* came from. So we will have to rely on your true-dreams to help us find the way.’

Rom stared at him. ‘You—you’re placing an awful lot of trust in my true-dreaming. Especially since I haven’t been doing any since the Battle.’

‘Then you’d better start practicing,’ Yldich said, and took a gulp of tea.

‘We can’t be sure Dánayel’s dream was anything other than just a dream,’ Eldairc said, his eyes narrowed against the morning sun. ‘Even if Rom manages to find it for us, we might get to the Lost Shore only to find it to be a big, bare, empty rock.’

Yldich nodded thoughtfully. ‘And then again, it might not be.’

Only crumbs remained of their breakfast. The heavy wooden door of the kitchen opened. Maetis and Eald joined them, and Dánayel, who took a seat on Eldairc's knee.

'So, you are serious about this plan of yours, then?' Eald said. Maetis looked at Yldich. He nodded.

'Rom, Eald and Eldairc will join me on my journey to the coast,' he said. He saw the expression on her face and shook his head. 'If I could have it my way, I would have a band of *Einache* warriors with us, and you to lead them. But Maetis, we have to remain inconspicuous. Four travelling *Einache* barbarians,' he halted and smiled, 'I mean three, and one of the Wandering Folk, will attract enough attention in the South as it is.'

'There's also such a thing as safety in numbers,' Eldairc said. 'I'd feel a whole lot better if I knew Maetis and her lads were shielding our backs.'

'You wouldn't if it aroused the suspicion of some minor nobles and they decided to pit their armies against us,' Yldich said gravely. He plucked at his short beard. 'I have a better idea. Maetis, you keep your warriors at the ready so they can get to us at a pinch. If we run into any kind of serious trouble, you'll be ready to come to our aid at once.'

'How will she know?' Eldairc raised his brows.

Maetis smiled and looked at Rom. She laid a hand on his arm. 'I'll know.'

They said their goodbyes outside in front of the great doors. Four horses were packed and ready. After she had given her father a long hug, and exchanged some words in *Einache*, Maetis took Rom aside. She laid her hands on his shoulders. A breeze lifted her fiery hair that hung loose over her cloak. She touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers.

'Be careful,' she said softly, and kissed him.

'I will,' he said, and brushed aside the hair that drifted across her face.

'You'd better,' she said. 'Or my warriors will be at your heels before you can do so much as snap your fingers.'

He grinned at her. 'I'll be all right. Besides, Yldich is with us.' He lifted Dánayel up, who stood looking at the group with wide eyes.

'Where are you going, *Dáydach*?' he said.

'We're going to see the place where the ships are coming from.'

'Can't I come with you, and uncle Eald and Eldairc?'

'Well, you're a little young for that,' Rom said. 'You make sure you do a lot of growing up until I get back. Then maybe next time you can come with us.' He handed him over to Maetis and kissed her once more.

'*Ti'héldae*,' he said softly. He mounted his horse.

‘*Ti’héldae,*’ she muttered, and tightened her arms around Dánayel’s body. ‘And don’t you dare get yourself into trouble.’

The weather was fair and looked like it would remain so for several days to come. The fields that rolled away from the path were dotted with buttercups. Yldich had started his habitual humming. It wasn’t much like *flestrérer*, the low, barely audible but far-carrying song he murmured when on the road and on the look-out for trouble, Rom noted. It sounded more like a good-humoured marching tune. He went and rode beside him.

‘You’re really enjoying yourself, aren’t you?’

Yldich stopped humming and looked aside at him in mild surprise. ‘Actually, I am. It’s been a while since I was on the road.’ He chuckled. ‘I’ve thought so before. All those years of travelling have all but turned me into a Wanderer myself.’

When the fields had made way for woodland, they had their first meal in a large, sunny glade. Yárah had packed their saddlebags with an assortment of dried foods, cheese and the kind of soft, spongy bread that would keep for days on end if they kept it in the waxy cloth it came in. They wouldn’t need to worry about hunting for a couple of days at least.

Eald munched his bread and sat looking at Yldich with an unusually thoughtful expression on his face.

‘Yldich,’ he said finally. ‘What do you know about the coast? And how are we going to find a boat?’

Yldich nodded thoughtfully. ‘Well, in my travels I’ve been as far as the southeast coast. I know there are little fishing villages at the coastline, and the fishermen use little wooden boats no larger than a shepherd’s hut. Beyond that, my knowledge fails.’ He grinned and looked at Rom. ‘As land-dwellers, which we have been for ages, we *Einache* of the North don’t hold well with boats, or anything much to do with the sea, for that matter. Most of us have never even laid eyes on it.’

Eald shuddered. The idea of a body of water so big you couldn’t see the end of it made him uncomfortable.

‘Well, I won’t be able to enlighten you,’ Rom said. ‘The people in the village I grew up in kept to their fields and sheep. And as a page, my world was confined by the walls of Lord Aldr’s Keep. Though the coast was only a couple of miles away, I have never even been near the sea.’

Eald lifted his brows. ‘So... you know as much about boats as me or Yldich?’ Rom nodded. ‘Well, that’s just wonderful,’ Eald muttered.

They had been on the road for four days, sleeping in open spaces in the forest, when small portions of their rations started to disappear at night. Eldairc was the first to notice. ‘Strange,’ he muttered, as he studied the contents of a saddlebag. ‘I could have sworn I had at least three pieces of bread in here, not two....’ Yldich overheard and came over to him. Eldairc studied the ground and raked his fingers through his tangled mane of hair. He bit his lip. ‘There are crumbs on the ground, and markings, tracks of an animal of some kind. Maybe a hungry badger, or a wolf?’

Yldich crouched to have a better look. He lifted a brow. ‘A very strange-looking wolf it would be. What, with it going on two legs.’

Rom joined them. ‘What’s going on?’

‘We’re being raided.’ Eldairc stood up and planted his hands on his hips. His usually cheerful face was grim. ‘But we’ll set a trap for the thief. I’ll catch him at it, or you may put me in a dress and make me dance the Spring Dance next Harvest Fest.’

Yldich grinned. ‘Careful with your words, or the gods may hold you to them.’ The Spring Dance was a lively dance, performed by giggling pubescent girls.

They went to sleep early. Eldairc kept a watchful eye open for the thief. He had made a show of nonchalantly dragging one saddlebag a little closer to the edge of the clearing and left it slightly open to lure the suspected raider.

He only pretended to sleep, his breathing deliberately slow and deep, with a snore or a throaty rumble thrown in between breaths for authenticity. In fact, his act was so unconvincing Rom had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. He turned over in his blanket to find a more comfortable position on his bed of last year’s leaves and distract himself from Eldairc’s performance.

That’s when he became aware of the presence at the edge of camp. He felt it more than he saw it: tense and alert, it began to make its way toward Eldairc’s supplies step by step, moving through the slender saplings like a snake through the grass. It hardly made a sound in passing. Rom slightly lifted his head from the pillow he’d made of his spare tunic. A thin moon was rising, and he could just discern a slender shadow move stealthily through the trees.

The sound of rustling told him the thief had found the bait and taken it. Pandemonium broke loose at once. Eldairc sprang from his bedding like a big straw-haired demon and grabbed a lighted branch from the fire. He made a dash for the shadow that crouched near his saddlebags and held up his makeshift torch. Eald was right at his heels. Rom and Yldich were only slightly less quick. They sprang up and were just in time to see a small, pale

face raised to them in an expression of horrified shock. Dark eyes were frozen on the tall *Einache*'s form. Rom caught an impression of ragged dirty clothes and narrow dirt-smearred cheeks. There was a sharp intake of breath from Eldairc, a whirl of rags and rustle of leaves. Then the little boy was gone.

'Who could he be?' Rom said. They had thrown some more branches on the fire and had some tea while they waited for sleep to retrace its steps to them.

'A beggar-child that's lost its way?' Eldairc said.

'All the way from Érskitha?' Yldich shook his head, his brow lined with doubt. The capital, the only large Southern city near, still lay several days to the southeast. One didn't usually find beggars in *Einache* villages.

'A *Tzanatzi* child separated from its wagon folk then?'

'Hush,' Eald hissed. 'He's back. Look.'

Eldairc had forgotten all about the bait. The piece of bread still lay where the child had dropped it, on the forest floor at the edge of camp. A small shadow moved for it, almost but not quite without making a sound.

Eldairc leapt to his feet. 'I'll get him this time,' he said between his teeth.

'Eldairc,' Yldich began, but the tall *Einache* was already on his way. He stole through the grass like a big cat. The shadow stirred, then was still. Eldairc dived into the bushes before the others could see what was going on. They heard a surprised yelp.

'He bit me!' Eldairc hastily stuck his hand in his mouth to suck the wound clean and spit on the ground with an expression of disgust. 'Little *skélgae*.' His voice was hoarse with indignation. The boy had dropped the bread and run from Eldairc as if all the demons of the Underworld were at his heels. At the edge of the clearing he stopped and looked back. He seemed to be hesitating.

Rom made a movement as if to approach him. The boy quickly took a few more steps in the opposite direction. Yldich halted Rom with a hand on his arm.

'Don't, Rom. Let him.'

'But, Yldich—'

'It's the only way to win his trust.' Yldich did not move a muscle, yet he seemed to somehow grow bigger in the light of the fire. He addressed the boy in a calm voice that seemed to expand in the air as it left his mouth. 'You're welcome to share our food with us, and you're welcome at our fire.' The boy looked back at him, his body taut with tension, every muscle ready to spring and take him away from the big strange man. 'You can do

as you choose. Share our fire or be cold in the woods by yourself.' Yldich calmly turned his back on the boy and went back to the fire. He sat down and started to warm his hands above it.

Rom looked at the boy. The child stared back at him, his eyes like coals in his dirt-smearred face. His ragged clothes looked barely adequate to cover his bare skin, let alone protect him from the wind and the rain. Rom grabbed Yldich's sleeve. He whispered.

'We can't let him go off on his own. Look at him.'

Yldich shook his head. 'Leave him be, Rom.'

'But it's just a child. What if he is taken by a hungry bear, or a wolf? Or worse, what if he bumps into human predators?'

'Listen, Rom. We can take him back kicking and screaming for his own good, all the way back to the House. That way, we will seem no different from the others.'

'What others?'

'The ones that made him into this.'

Rom stared at his profile. Yldich's heavy brows were pulled into a frown. His ginger hair seemed aflame in the light of the fire. 'What do you think happened to him?'

Yldich shook his head slowly. 'I don't know. But it can't be good.'

They sat for a while in silence. Neither the men nor the boy moved a muscle, as if they were all waiting to see who would make the first move. Then Yldich took the kettle. He moved slowly and carefully so the child could see exactly what he was doing. He hung it over the fire and heated the stew they had made the day before. It wasn't long before a hearty smell began to drift across the clearing. The boy shifted position as the smell reached his nose, but he didn't move any closer.

When the stew was ready Yldich filled a bowl and took it to the middle of the clearing, just a few paces away from the fire. He put it down and backed away. The child hesitated a moment, his eyes on the bowl. It was just close enough for him to smell the food, and grab it if he dared, and far away enough from the strange men to seem safe. He seemed to deliberate. Then he jumped to his feet, quickly grabbed the bowl, backed off a few paces and proceeded to eat.

'Well,' Rom said. 'Apparently you have a better way with children than Eldairc.'

'Or wild beasts,' Eldairc said in a sour tone. His hand was still throbbing.

The boy kept his dark eyes fixed on the men who sat looking at him while he attacked the food. He ate quickly, barely taking the time to

swallow and breathe between mouthfuls. He held onto the bowl as if he were afraid they might snatch it away any moment. They watched him with raising dismay and curiosity.

‘What’s your name?’ Eald tried. The boy only stared at him with his dark eyes. He took another mouthful of stew and chewed hastily.

‘What happened to your parents?’ Yldich said in a soft voice. The boy stared at him in silence and lifted the bowl to his mouth once more.

‘Maybe he doesn’t understand us,’ Eldairc said, with a glance at the child’s dark hair and eyes. ‘Maybe he doesn’t speak Southern.’

Yldich looked at the boy. ‘*Ya’elemni aerwascht’e?*’

The boy’s head snapped up. ‘*Elemni Áyra.*’ The men stared at him in utter surprise.

‘Well,’ Eldairc said finally. ‘A wild *Tzanatzi* child who speaks only *Einache*. What’s next? Flying pigs?’

‘*Tzanatzi,*’ the boy echoed in a clear voice. His eyes snapped to Rom. ‘*Elemni Tzanatzi.*’

Rom had enough *Einache* by now to understand the boy was referring to his ethnic origins. He stared at the dark eyes. There was something about them. Something familiar. An image came into his mind and he nearly dismissed it as ridiculous. The dream. The thread that had split and unfurled in two directions. One of them had rolled out to Dánayel. The other—

A dirty hand shot out like a snake and grabbed his wrist. The empty bowl fell to the ground. The little fingers tightened like a vice and Rom gasped. The world shuddered at the edges. He stared at the child with wide, unseeing eyes. His breath became ragged and he began to shake violently. He seemed unable to release from the child’s grip.

Eldairc sprang up. ‘What’s he doing?’ A moan came from Rom’s mouth as if he were in pain. ‘Stop it!’ He turned to the boy and was about to tear him away from Rom’s arm.

Yldich’s voice stopped him. ‘Leave him!’ He stared intently at Rom and the child, locked together in a wordless exchange. The boy stared in Rom’s eyes with an intensity of purpose he had not displayed before.

It was night. They walked the crest of a low hill, unconcerned by the descent of darkness, as they had done so many times, especially in spring. The road lay straight ahead, at the foot of the hill. The air was warm and humid, except for when the breeze carried the fresh scent of night blooming flowers, grass, and sun warmed earth. The last light of the sun stained the sky a deep dark indigo.

He held her hand and looked up at her every once in a while. She carried the travelling harp in an oiled leather sheath on her shoulder. The rest of their gear, their food and some clothes, were stuffed in a leather bag she wore strapped to her back. She preferred to walk when the weather allowed it. She'd never had reason to be afraid to walk the dark before. Who would dare touch a *Náeria*?

Their feet had just found the road when the men came up to meet them. There were three of them, Southerners by the looks of them. Though he couldn't be sure. Their clothes were worn and dirty. They hadn't shaved in days. He saw bits of armour, leather jerkins, Southern tunics and *Einache* boots, a hodgepodge of different styles. They were all heavily armed.

He felt her stiffen beside him. Her hand went to the dagger she carried on her belt. The hand that held his had tightened its grip. It had turned to ice. Her voice was a soft hiss. 'When I tell you to, run.'

The strangers moved along the road as if they were prowling the nightly streets and taverns of a large town. They had no connection to or awareness of the earth beneath their feet, the little creatures that hid in the grass, the smells carried by the wind. They might as well have been blind and deaf. Despite their clumsiness, some other instinct made them aware of the lonely travellers immediately.

The men halted as their eyes fell on the young woman and the boy. The boy heard them comment in the Southern language. He had only a few words of Southern, but it was clear from the strangers' tone that they were in danger. The men stepped forward close enough for him to see their eyes.

There was something disturbing in the way the strangers eyed his mother, though he couldn't quite define it. He didn't understand it. He'd seen men look at his mother before, with eyes that were warm, or even feverish, but this was different. Fear took root in his belly and started to grow. His mother answered them in a sharp voice. There was an undertone he'd never heard in it before, though he recognized it immediately. It was fear.

One of the men took a deliberate step forward. He spoke in a mixture of Southern and *Einache*. 'Get rid of the little rat. Unless you want us to do him, too.'

His mother gave a sharp tug at his arm. 'Run.' He stared at her with his dark eyes. He didn't move.

The man laughed, a low, humourless sound. 'Well. Maybe we should start with him—' He stood as frozen and stared at the man as he approached. A sharp blow to his face whipped him out of his trance.

‘Run!’ she cried and pushed him aside. The man took another step forward and reached out a grimy hand. He heard the hiss of his mother’s dagger. He ran.

Sometime during his flight, he tripped over a protruding rock and fell into nothingness. When he woke, it was dawn. His limbs were stiff and cold, his clothes damp with the morning dew. He found his way back to the road. Her body lay where they had left it. He sat down beside her and took her hand. It was cold, the fingers stiff in his grasp. Her empty eyes were turned to the sky.

He sat with her all that day. She had been his life, and all roads began with her. Now his life had been torn away, and all roads were lost. There was nothing left to do but sit beside her.

The animals finally chased him away. He heard their cries at dusk, the throaty howls of wolves and the patter of their feet. Scavengers. Starving outcasts. He could see their fluorescent eyes, their gleaming teeth as they closed in. He stood over her for a while, shouting and wheeling his arms to scare them away. They quickly realised the human cub wasn’t much of a threat. They closed in on the body and snarled, baring their teeth. The largest and boldest made a dash for him.

Instinct took over and he fled.

Rom broke free of the boy’s hold and fell back with a gasp. He doubled over and was sick in the grass. Yldich helped him sit up.

‘They raped her.’ He was shaking. Tears ran over his face. ‘They killed her and now I’m all alone...’

Yldich shook him gently. ‘Rom. Come back.’

Rom drew a sleeve over his eyes and realized he was still crying the boy’s tears. He shook his head in an effort to regain his sense of self. He wiped damp strands of hair out of his face and stared at the boy. ‘The *Náeria*. You’re Alyra’s son.’

Yldich took a blanket from his makeshift bed and drew it around Rom’s shoulders.

Rom laughed shakily. ‘It’s not me you should be comforting,’ he said with a motion of his head to the child. ‘He’s the one who lived it.’ He gazed at the boy who sat still as a stone and watched him from under his finely drawn dark brows with that intent expression Rom knew well. He’d seen the same look in the eyes of his fellow pages after they’d been taken to be whipped by their elders. He tried to imagine what it must be like to be a

frightened child, alone in the woods for weeks, and didn't find it very hard. He had just felt it.

The knowledge made his hands yearn to reach out and hold the child and comfort him. He imagined the slightest movement to that effect would have him bolt again. Then the idea came to him he could try and use words. 'I knew... your mother,' he said in a muddle of *Einache* and Southern. Maetis never did manage to fully acquaint him with the throaty *Einache* language. She spoke perfect Southern, and they had a language all their own, that needed no words anyway. A quiver of interest went through the boy. 'I... heard her play,' Rom said slowly, struggling with his verbs. 'The... most beautiful... harping I ever heard.'

The child seemed to grow a little in the light of the fire. 'She's the best harpist of the North.' His voice was high and clear. Then a shadow stole across his face.

Was.

The dreadful tale passed on, the boy's body went limp and he slowly slumped to the ground. Rom caught him before he toppled over. He pulled the blanket from his shoulders and drew it about the child. Yldich prepared some bedding. The boy was asleep before Rom had even laid him down.

The two men stood staring down on the sleeping child for a while, his little body nearly lost in the blankets and skins, while Eldairc cleared up their things and Eald extinguished the fire. Rom felt a thick veil of sadness settle on him and close up his throat. He was in no mood to talk. After a solemn drink in silence, the men went back to bed.

Áyra drifted out of a deep layer of sleep, becoming vaguely aware of his surroundings. He sensed about him for anything familiar. A larger shape rolled into a blanket lay beside him. There was something reassuring about it. Without thought, he rolled towards it and huddled against it. Feeling safe for the first time in weeks, he drifted off into sleep again.

He was used to waking up beside his mother on the forest floor. In spring and summer, when they were on the road, they frequently slept under the stars, huddled against each other in their blankets. Although he had woken up with the same familiar sense of comfort, there was something different about the form he lay sleeping against. Memory flooded back and he sat up abruptly, shedding blankets and skins. A deep, friendly voice stopped him from taking off immediately.

'*Ya'hey,*' the big man with the ginger hair said. He was stirring something in the kettle that hung over the fire. 'You might want to stay for

breakfast. It's ready in a minute. Grab a spoon and join me.' The boy stood staring at Yldich, one blanket still drawn around him as if he was unable to reach a decision whether to run or stay. 'We have not been properly introduced last night,' Yldich went on. 'I'm Yldich,' he pointed the wooden ladle at his chest, 'that's Rom,' he pointed at the bundle of blankets he had slept against, 'that's Eald,' with a motion to the rusty wisps sticking out of a bundle of blankets, 'and that's Eldairc,' with a sweep of the ladle towards the big straw-haired man that lay sleeping a couple of paces away, 'the one you took a bite out of yesterday.'

The boy blinked at Yldich. 'He scared me,' he said in *Einache*.

Yldich grinned. 'I daresay he did.' He ladled some stew into a bowl and handed it to the boy. 'He thought you were a nightly raider. If he had known you were one of us, he wouldn't have chased you into the bushes.' He smiled. 'But then, you failed to introduce yourself, didn't you?' The boy drew himself up.

'I'm the *Náeria*'s son,' he said, as if it were a title of nobility. '*Elemni Áyra*.' Yldich's eyes changed subtly as he took in the boy's finely drawn features, the proud dark eyes.

Rom stirred. He sat up and noticed them by the fire. He disentangled from his blankets and joined them. '*Ya'hey*,' he said and pushed his hair out of his eyes. 'How are you now?' He spoke in *Einache* with a noticeable Southern accent. Áyra stared at him. Then he nodded.

'Eat your stew before it gets cold,' Yldich said. 'And then we must talk.'

'There were three of them,' Rom said. 'Southerners, by the looks of them. Though there was something... off about them. Something strange. Their clothes, for one.' They sat around the fire, having their breakfast of warmed up stew and stale bread.

'What about them?' Yldich said.

A faint smile formed on Rom's face. 'If you'd grown up in the South, you'd know. Southerners have rather strict ideas about dress. What colours go with what, what style goes with what occupation. You would never take a goat herder for a baker, for instance. Or a paid mercenary for a common rogue.' He tore off another piece of bread. 'Now these men, they were dressed... incongruously. Not the kind of clothes you'd expect on a Southerner, not even a professional robber. They wore worn *Einache* boots, and Southern tunics, and pieces of leather armour I didn't recognize.' He shook his head. 'There was just something... off about it.'

Yldich nodded slowly. He noticed Áyra had finished his first helping of stew and refilled the boy's bowl without comment. Áyra started on his

second bowlful as if he'd nothing proper to eat for weeks. Which was probably true, Rom thought. He wondered silently how the child had survived all this time on his own. He looked as if he was only just a few months older than his son. He pictured Dánayel, left on his own to survive in the woods and shuddered.

'I still don't understand how the boy managed to tell you all this,' Eldairc said. He looked slightly uncomfortable.

'Neither do I,' Rom said. 'He grabbed my hand and made me... live it. I've never experienced anything like that in my life.'

'You saw it through his eyes?' Eald said. Rom nodded.

'Do you suppose it's a... *Tzanatzi* thing?' Eldairc said.

'If it is, I've never heard about it,' Rom said. He looked at Yldich. Yldich sat looking at the slender boy beside him who sat munching his bread in silence while he eyed the half circle of men with his impenetrable eyes. He shook his head.

'I wonder,' he said softly. He put down his bowl with a sigh. 'Well. Whatever we do, we'd better be on our guard. Eald, if you can get us some more firewood, Eldairc and I will go and have a look around. See if we can find any tracks of those robbers.' He nodded at Rom. 'You two can finish up here. Clear up and hide our traces. And Áyra,' he addressed the boy, who looked up at him with his dark eyes, 'you make sure now that kettle is good and empty when we get back, won't you?' A hesitant smile formed on the boy's face and he nodded. 'Good,' Yldich said. He rose and lifted his sword from his saddlebag. 'We'll see you two later.'

Rom went to his saddlebags and girded on his sword with a sense of reluctance. He turned to Áyra, who'd scraped the kettle clean with his last piece of bread, while his eyes took in everything Rom did.

'Well then. Let's cover our tracks. I'll show you how it's done.' The boy stared at him with blank eyes and Rom realised he had habitually spoken in Southern. 'Let us... bury the fire pit,' he said in halting *Einache*. 'Hide... our traces.' The boy blinked at him. Then he nodded.

They had been working at it for a while, filling the pit with refuse and covering it with dirt and leaves when Rom heard heavy footsteps behind him on the forest floor.

'Back already?' he said without turning around. Then he froze. The eyes that were fixed on his back were not the friendly eyes of Eald or Eldairc. Nor did he feel Yldich's familiar calm presence behind him. The eyes that were on him were cold and calculating. He turned around and stiffened as he took in the bulky forms of three heavily armed strangers.

Like the robbers he'd seen through the boy's eyes, they wore bits and pieces of strange armour and were heavily built. The tallest of them would have stuck out in a crowd of Southerners. He was unshaven; his hazel eyes were dim and bloodshot, as if he spent most of his time in badly lit inns and smoky taverns. He looked strangely out of place in the forest.

'Run,' Rom said in a low voice. Áyra looked up at him with wide eyes and shook his head.

Not again.

The first man lowered his heavy pack to the ground and took a step forward. His eyes travelled along Rom's slender frame, the graceful line of his jaw, the dark hair that fell across his eyes. An unwholesome light lit in the murky eyes.

'Hey, Arnalf,' the man to his right said. 'You ever had a boy before?'

The hazel-eyed man coughed and laughed a throaty laugh. 'No,' he said and tilted his head as he looked at the slender young man, as if he was appraising him. 'But there's a first time for everything.' He took a step towards Rom.

There was a flash of silver. Two men stepped back in shock as the body of the first robber sank to the ground, twitching and spurting blood. Rom lowered his sword to the ground and stared at the body. He had lashed out before he'd had a chance to think. He hadn't even been aware of drawing his sword. It was still singing in his hands, a low, humming sound that held an indefinable sense of threat.

Their senses dulled and calloused by years of hard living on the road, the sudden death of their comrade sensitized the robbers to the reality of the danger before them. This was no easy prey. One of them wavered, his hand creeping almost imperceptibly towards the leather sheath on his thigh where he kept his dagger.

'*Ey várta!*' Áyra's clear voice rang through the forest like a bell and alerted Rom to the danger. The sword flashed again and the second robber fell back with a cry of outrage and pain, his right arm hanging limp at his side. Blood dripped to the ground. He growled.

'*Tzanatzi scum.*' He made the sign against evil with his left hand and stepped back as he clutched his limp right arm, cradling it to his chest.

His comrade's eyes flitted left and right.

Four horses. One man, one little brat. Two or three others who could be back at any time.

His sword left the sheath with a decisive movement. He lashed out at Rom. Rom parried with a quick movement of his slender sword. The man quickly moved around it and Rom set his teeth as he realized he was up for a challenge. The robber moved with an ease and routine one wouldn't

expect from a common cutthroat. Usually, robbers fought in little alleyways using daggers or garrottes. They were not used to handling swords.

This is no ordinary thug.

He recognized the trained movements, the orderly way the man attacked and parried. The man fought like a soldier. He'd seen them practice often enough, as a child in a Southern court. He could tell the man had some years of training. He had also allowed himself to get rusty. Just like his sword.

'Get the bastard, Téó,' the other robber growled. He had bound a piece of cloth around his arm and tightened the knot with his teeth. He reached for the knife in his belt.

They had gone a mile or so in the direction the boy had come from. There were no traces on the forest floor. Of course, Eldairc thought, the rains in the intermediate weeks would have washed away any footprints. Yldich was humming softly, a soft nasal sound that was almost like a chant.

Eldairc saw him touching the leaves of bushes, the low-hanging branches of trees with a delicate, questing touch of his fingers. 'I doubt you're going to see any tracks up there,' he said. 'Unless they took off like birds.'

Yldich turned his head and grinned. 'Not very likely,' he said. 'But it's amazing what the Forest will tell you if you're prepared to listen.'

Eldairc drew up a brow. 'Like what?'

Yldich halted. 'Well.' He laid his hand on the trunk of a slender rowan and closed his eyes. He was still for a while, his face serene, his breathing steady. Eldairc looked at him in wonder. 'They've passed through this part of the Forest,' Yldich said finally.

Eldairc stared at him. 'How do you know?'

'The tree told me so.' Yldich sighed. 'I felt it. A dark, dull energy, clumsily making its way through the trees. They have all felt it. They still remember.' He laughed at the look on Eldairc's face. 'Trees have excellent memories. So would you if you experienced life at their pace. It is much slower than ours. To them, we are like fleeting shadows, butterflies who live but for a day. While they span the ages with their tall trunks.' He lovingly touched the rowan's bark. 'They store their experiences in their bark like we do on parchment. If you know how to read them, there's not a whole lot that happens in a Forest you can't find out. If you'll listen to the trees.' Eldairc shook his head.

Yldich walked up to a tall oak and laid his hands on the trunk. 'The elder trees now, the oaks and maples, their senses run both deeper and further than those of the younger trees. They can tell you much of what has

been, and sometimes even what is to come.’ He closed his eyes once more. He became one with the tree, sinking down into the earth with its roots, his awareness rising and branching out, becoming one with the Forest.

Eldairc fidgeted and put his weight on one foot, then the other. He scratched his head and suppressed a yawn. ‘Well. I think—’

Yldich’s eyes flew open. He laid a hand on the young man’s arm. ‘Eldairc. Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

A thin, high wail reverberated through the trees and ended in a low, threatening murmur.

‘That.’

The wounded robber stood watching the fighters from a couple of paces away. He weighed his belt knife loosely in his hand as he waited for an opening. He gnashed his teeth. Téó was taking too bloody long. He should have finished off the Wanderer by now. If he didn’t end it soon, the others would be back. He took a few steps, circling the fighters until he had a better view of the *Tzanatzi* swordfighter. He held the knife by the point and began to move his arm backwards.

There was a flash of movement in the corner of his eye. A handful of dirt was hurled in his face. He drew back cursing, his vision obscured by soot and ash. He kneeled on the forest floor and wiped his watering eyes. A shower of stones and earth rained down on his back.

‘You little bastard...’ he turned his head and caught the *Tzanatzi* brat grabbing another handful of dirt and clutching it in his little fists, ready to hurl it in his direction. He took a step towards the child, the knife raised in his hand.

Rom heard a curse to his left and took a step back, trying to get an impression of what was going on. Immediately, the robber in front of him redoubled his efforts and forced him to turn to him, desperately blocking the heavy blows of the sword.

Áyra clutched his artillery in his hands as he stared at the robber looming over him. The knife flashed. He fell back with a gasp. There was a whirl of colour and suddenly the robber was rolling in the dirt, the young man with the copper hair right on top of him. They wrestled like angry cats, cursing and spitting. The robber managed to get out from under the lanky young man and tore at him with the knife. The young man cried out and kicked at the robber. The knife flew out of his hand. For one heartbeat, they stared at the knife lying on the ground, neither of them moving. Then they both dived for it. A cry of outrage and pain tore through the air. Then there was silence.

Rom fell back against a tree and gasped for breath as the rusty sword was thrust at his chest. He threw himself sideways and rolled away, just in time to evade another blow. He kicked at the robber's shins and heard a cry of pain as the man stumbled backwards.

Then he was aware of the silence. He called out.

‘Áyra!’ There was no answer. A surge of anxiety went through his belly and changed into a strange, calm sense of anger as it reached his heart. He set his teeth, sprang up and evaded the robber's downward sweep. He whirled around him, wheeling the sword in a broad arc. The robber's body sank shuddering to its knees as his head thumped to the ground. Rom turned away and scrambled through dirt and leaves in the direction he had last heard the boy's voice.

Eald wrestled himself free from the robber's heavy body and sat up. Rom landed beside him, scattering dead leaves and dirt. He grabbed Áyra's shoulders.

‘Are you all right?’ The boy nodded mutely. Eald's face pulled into a grin. ‘He was pelting the man with rocks and dirt for all he was worth.’ He chuckled. ‘Aeldic would approve of him. A true warrior in the making.’

Yldich and Eldairc burst into the clearing, swords drawn and faces red with exertion.

‘It's all right, we've got it,’ Eald said, and waved them back with an airy gesture of his hand. Eldairc kneeled next to the robber's body. Yldich looked around, noting the bodies of the other two robbers lying limp in the dirt. ‘What happened?’

‘They surprised us,’ Rom said. ‘I got one, but the other one nearly had me cornered. Then Eald showed up.’

Yldich pulled up a brow. ‘How did you know they were in trouble?’

Eald grinned and pulled a hand over his brow. Instead of his face getting cleaner, he smeared the dirt in more thoroughly. ‘I was feeling my way around a bit, getting the firewood and listening to the trees, when I heard Rom's sword sing. This fellow here was about to use his knife on the boy. Little bugger's lucky I've got such good ears. Got here just in time.’

Yldich snorted and turned to Eldairc. ‘See, now,’ he said. ‘You never know when a *Yaevers*'s skills will come in handy.’

The boy began to tremble. Rom laid his arm around the narrow shoulders. Áyra was shuddering; a shaking that came from deep within and wouldn't stop. He closed his eyes.

‘It's all right,’ Rom said softly. ‘You're safe now.’ There was a wheezing sound below. They looked down at the robber's body. He was

fighting for air; the knife he had tried to wrest from Eald's hand lodged between his ribs. He grinned through his pain.

'Wouldn't... be so sure of that if I were you.' Blood spilled from his mouth and he coughed. 'Your... kind's doomed anyway.'

'What do you mean?' Rom grabbed the robber's tunic and brought his face closer to his. 'What are you talking about?' A gurgling sound came from the man's mouth. A shudder went through him. Then his empty eyes turned to the sky. Rom shook him once more. 'Tell me!'

Yldich laid a hand on Rom's shoulder. 'It's over, lad.' Rom let go of the dead man's tunic. He sat back, staring at the body. 'He's gone.'

Eldairc and Yldich dragged the three corpses to the edge of the glade. As they stood looking down at them, Eald and Rom joined them.

'What would three Southern mercenaries be doing this far north?' Eldairc said.

Rom shook his head. 'Look at their clothes. These are not Southern mercenaries. Mercenaries wear cheap mail and leather jerkins.' He shook his head. 'And they're better organized. They get paid for their work, after all.'

Eald looked at the blood-stained tunics and shuddered. 'Robbers, then?'

'Robbers don't fight like this,' Rom said. 'They fought like Southern soldiers. I would know them anywhere.'

'But Southern soldiers don't go about raping and killing travellers in the *Einache* countryside,' Eldairc's dry voice sounded. 'At least, as far as I know. And where did they get these boots?' He motioned towards the worn *Einache* boots with his foot.

'The spoils of war.' Yldich's voice was grim.

'What?' They turned their heads to look at him.

'The spoils of war,' Yldich said. 'Look at their faces. They fought at Gardeth Battle Plain. I'm sure of it. They have the right age. They're veterans. And when the King returned to the South, at some point they deserted. Maybe formed a little band of soldiers of their own, pillaging and killing.'

'But the war was seven years ago,' Rom said. 'If they had been scouring the countryside all this time, the rumours would have reached us long ago.'

'So where were they in the intervening years?' Eldairc said, a hand at his chin. 'And what have they been doing?'

'Exactly,' Yldich said.

While Áyra looked on from a few paces distance, a blanket around his small frame, Yldich, Eldairc and Eald began dragging the bodies away

from the clearing, into the trees. After a while they halted. Eldairc wiped the sweat from his forehead. The men had been tall and heavy in life. In death, they were even heavier.

‘What exactly are we going to do with them?’ he said.

‘Well, as we have neither the tools, nor the time to bury them properly,’ Yldich said, ‘we’d best give them to the Forest.’

Eldairc lifted his brows. ‘What?’

Yldich smiled. ‘The ancient *Einache* buried their dead like this if they had no time for a proper burial, long before they lived in houses of timber and stone.’ His grey eyes glittered. ‘I’ll show you.’ He grabbed the corpse’s heels, placing the feet neatly beside each other in the direction of the setting sun. He folded the hands of the body carefully over the chest. Then he spread some thin branches over the body in a criss-cross pattern, humming softly. He took a step back and lit a bundle of herbs from a leather pouch. He chanted softly as he smeared the smoke over the body from feet to head, and back.

‘What’s that... song?’ Eald said in a hushed voice.

Yldich stepped back from the body. ‘He belongs to the earth now.’ He looked up. ‘That’s the ancient song for the Dead. To acknowledge life and death and ensure a safe passage to the Underworld.’

Eldairc shook his head. ‘A lot of trouble to go through for a robber and a cutthroat.’

Yldich smiled. ‘To honour the life and death of an adversary,’ he said, ‘is the hallmark of the true warrior.’

Rom had begun rummaging through the robber’s things. Perhaps there was something there that would give them a clue to their identity. His gaze fell on the heavy leather pack the tallest of them had dropped at the edge of the clearing. There was something about it, about its shape, that made his skin tingle.

‘Áyra,’ he whispered. The boy took a few halting steps towards him. ‘Look.’

The boy’s hands shot out like hawks. He gripped the leather pack and carefully weighed its contents in his hands. Then he began to open it, a fierce expression on his small face. The harp had been wrapped in soft oiled rags. The oiled leather had kept out rain and dirt; the rags had cushioned the harp when it fell. Áyra unwrapped it with care and examined it with his hands.

Rom bit his lip. It was only weeks ago since his mother had been killed and the killers had taken it from her dead body. The boy searched the soft

grain of the dark shiny wood with his fingers, his eyes closed in concentration.

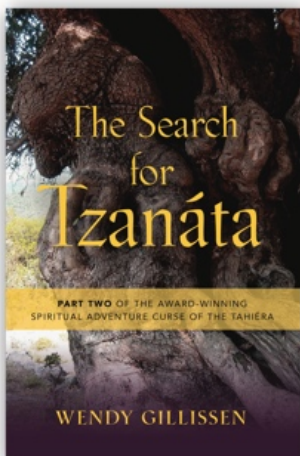
He looks as if he's come home.

Áyra set the harp between his knees and trailed a hand along the strings. It was obviously made for an adult and much too big for him; the boy had to clench it between his knees to keep it steady. His right hand went to a bone key and adjusted it slightly to tune a string. Then he started to play.

It was a soft, melancholy tune with warm notes plucked from the strings like the last fruit of summer. It pulled the others from their task and brought them to the centre of the clearing, where they stared at Áyra as he sat playing, his features stilled in an expression of serene bliss.

Rom stared at the boy. The dark head was bowed slightly forward on the slender neck; his hair fell forward and almost hid his face. The shadow of dark lashes fell on a gracefully shaped cheek and suddenly Rom was struck by the likeness to the *Náeria*. The melancholy song touched his heart but softened it rather than open the wounds of loss. A word rose from his memory like a hidden treasure from the sea.

‘*Aguéri,*’ he whispered. ‘Divinely inspired.’



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